

## CHURCH AND SCHOOL IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Americans may wonder why Central Europeans are concerned about issues of church and school, religion and education. Europe has a heritage that mingles church and state involvement in education. This stems from the Middle-ages and before when the church was the prime instigator of the educational effort. The importance of church involvement in the education and indoctrination of the rising generation was not lost on Protestant reformers, who copied many of the approaches taken by the Catholics to educational instruction.

The Enlightenment in the 18th Century and the Industrial Revolution in the 19th encouraged the growth of universal primary education and its eventual secularization. Society had a stake in the creation of an educated populace, and the state took over the obligation, which had previously rested exclusively with the family and been served by the church, to see to it that all children received primary education.

Events of the 20th century with the rise of science and technology brought about further secularization of education, and in lands dominated by communism the rejection of any religious influence in society became part of this process. Since it opposed any dogma other than its own, Communism tried to break the hold of the religion on the people and particularly on the rising generation. This went beyond outlawing religious instruction in the schools to the confiscation of church property for more "socially productive" uses, such as for museums and secular schools and colleges. In Central and East Central Europe and the Soviet Union the state actively persecuted religious leaders of all faiths. In the Soviet Union the campaign against the Jewish faith was most intense. Minority Christian faiths, Roman Catholics, and Russian Orthodox were also persecuted, as was Islam. In some cases, family members who undertook to "deform" their children's minds by teaching them religious "myths" were included in the persecution. Nonetheless, the party was unable to completely extinguish religious sensibilities, even after seven decades of effort. The failure to eradicate religion provides a notable example of the limitations of mass communication, even when backed by state power.<sup>†</sup>

While the party strove to eliminate religion, critics warned of and lamented the passing of any moral foundation for society, once the religious and moral "capital" of the past was exhausted. For centuries, liberty itself had been held to be dependent on morality. For instance, Tocqueville believed that "Liberty cannot be established without morality nor morality without faith."<sup>††</sup> He realized that traditional religions had been entangled historically with the institutions that democracy was destroying. For that reason the champions of

<sup>†</sup> For details on the effort in the Soviet Union see DAVID POWELL, *Anti-religious Propaganda in the Soviet Union* (Boston: MIT Press), 1966.

<sup>††</sup> *Tocqueville's Democracy in America* edited by Phillips Bradley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1980, p. xcvi.

liberty in his day, having "seen religion in the ranks of their adversaries," either attacked it or were afraid to defend it. But Tocqueville regarded religious faith with its emphasis on the ultimate dignity of individual souls as fundamental.

Central Europe's experience with Communism during the past 40 years seems to confirm these views. Without a belief in the existence of something higher than the state which also under girded the dignity and worth of each individual and called on men to live lives guided by moral purposes and principles, public and private morality eroded. The bankrupt state of the economy was matched by a moral bankruptcy which corroded any basis of legitimacy the political authorities might have hoped for. Ancient virtues of honesty and integrity were without adequate foundation any longer and were positively dysfunctional to short-term, individual survival.

We can conclude that many people believe moral education is necessary, and many also believe that a religious basis is needed for morals.

For most Central Europeans the question now is the extent to which public education should involve the church in teaching children religious doctrines that under gird morality. Furthermore, the churches are applying for return of their property and compensation for the damages suffered.

A range of opinion exists on these issues and they become matters of the degree to which church and schools will be allowed to join in the instruction of children. Models to consider are available plentifully around the world, but many of them are models to be shunned.

The U.S. approach which attempts to ban any element of religious contamination from the state supported schools results, as Coons shows, in the establishment of a secularized version of values which becomes a de facto "state religion" although such an outcome is prohibited by the First Amendment.

The aversion of the original drafters of the constitution to an established state church was an outgrowth of their negative experiences with the tyranny such a system might embrace, just as Tocqueville remarked. As Coons indicates, however, many kinds of restrictions on state support or cooperation with religious schools were an outgrowth of 19th century Protestant resistance to the inroads of Catholic and Jewish immigrants.

Western European countries – Britain, Germany, and Italy for example – are more comfortable than Americans with a limited amount of religious instruction in a context where parents and finally children have a say in whether the child is subjected in school to the teachings of a particular faith.

These countries seem less hung-up than the US over the implications for mingling of church and state and are inclined to allow two hours of religious instruction per week in the schools or to allow state funds to partially finance religious schools.

But the details of the relationship are nonetheless matters for debate, even with a single family. Mother may feel that education should be secular and that religion should be taught in the churches, not in the schools, while father, whose brother is a priest, may feel that religious instruction belongs in the

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offers of alternative quarters, since the original buildings are sacred to them (and usually in better repair).

Conflicts arise over social pressures to attend religious holidays, such as Christmas. In one instance, a school in Budapest publicly announced that all the students were expected to attend services in the Catholic Church. When a few parents protested, quiet, unpublicized exceptions were allowed, but social pressures led to few children taking advantage of the exceptions.

Conflicts arise over whether grades for religious instruction are to be included in the regular grade records of the students. The church would like to have them included, but those from minority faiths or non-believers object that this may open a way for discrimination.

Because of social pressures, the compromise which allows those children who don't want the instruction to sit in the back or go to another room is not satisfactory to them or their parents.

The current government wants support from the church and expects that to the extent they support the church's demands it will be forthcoming. Although the central church hasn't made recommendations about whom to vote for, local priests have been known to give their congregations advice. Surely they have that right, but on the other hand, this again mingles church and state influence.

Some observers believe that because of the decline of religious observance in Western Europe, many churches are paying a lot of attention to the rebirth of religion in Eastern Europe, hoping that a renaissance of religious, faith will revitalize the church elsewhere as well. They strive for a level of involvement in education they do not enjoy in the West in order to accomplish this. The simple, American dogma of separating church and state and keeping the religious teachings of a particular faith out of the public schools does not solve the problem for Europeans. The debate continues and the ideal resolution is yet distant.

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